

IV.—*Aerolites and Religion.*

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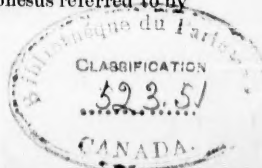
(Read May 18, 1895.)



Few natural phenomena are more terrifying than the fall of an aerolite. A ball of fire, often said to be "as big as the moon," suddenly appears, moving with marvellous swiftness. A noise, as of cannon, followed by the rattle of musketry, stuns the ears. Perhaps a cloud is formed, emitting a shower of stones. Sometimes there is a second loud report, a continuous rumbling that lasts for minutes, a hissing sound, and thousands of missiles bombard an area several miles across. Or there may be a whizz from a body enveloped in smoke, leaving a trail of fire. The fireball may emit jets of flame and disappear with a noise as of distant thunder, or it may actually fall in the sight of the observer. It may rush at the rate of twenty miles a second over a thousand miles of earth and sea, at a height of a hundred miles or so, dropping a fragment here and another there, or it may come vertically down. If it buries itself in the soil, it may penetrate several feet. If it falls in the ocean, it is, of course, for ever lost. But it may strike a rock with but a scanty covering, or ice or snow, or hard packed sand, or trees and even buildings. Then it is usually found to be hot, and of a shape, colour and material utterly unlike the stones of earth.

It would be surprising if in the earlier ages of the world men had not seen in the meteorite not merely a message from the gods but a messenger, a very god himself. All natural religion begins with fear, though it may end with love, and in the study of the history of religions it may be that the sun and his powers have received too exclusive attention. Zeus has certainly been ethnically, etymologically, astronomically supreme; yet the thunderstorm, with its attendant terrors, or the rarer and still more dreadful meteorite, must have received the earliest notice of primitive man, whether on the prairies of America, the steppes of Russia, the dry littoral of the Mediterranean, or the sandy plains of Arabia. There are, indeed, many traces of a very early and very widely spread cult of the aerolite, especially among the races of nomadic habits, and to some of these this paper is intended to refer.

In the Greek fable, Chronos used to devour his children (*Tempus edax rerum*), but, one day, they saved Zeus by giving his father a stone to crunch, instead. The stone itself, Pausanias says, was shown at Delphi, near the tomb of Neoptolemos, in the precincts sacred to Apollo. This was probably an aerolite. The image of Diana at Ephesus referred to by

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Euripides and in the *Acts* is described as a bust, with many breasts, tapering to a pedestal, the whole of black stone. It fell from heaven, and part of it may have been an aerolite, or it may have been made to replace the original aerolithic deity. The club of Hercules, worshipped in Thrace, was probably a Thor's hammer, the Thracians being of Northern kin, and an aerolite. Like the images or symbols of Apollo, the guardian of the ways, and of the Paphian Venus, it was said to have fallen from above. These uncertain instances are adduced first because the opportunity is afforded thereby to prove that it is not important as a matter of religion to discriminate between a real and an imaginary aerolite. A gentleman still living in Toronto having purchased from a farmer near Niagara a nodule containing quartz crystals, read a paper to a learned society, in which he explained its structure as being that of a planetoid, rounded, flattened at the poles, and he argued that the interior of our globe might be crystalline too. There is little doubt that the farmer saw a meteorite fall, and, picking up this geode, believed it to be the aerolite. Again, one of the secretaries of the Astronomical Society of Toronto, whose family thought they saw a meteorite fall into a snow-bank, delved into the drift and brought up a water-worn pebble of gneiss, which a less experienced person might have sworn to be an aerolite. So with the objects of the ancients' veneration, it could make little difference whether they were really meteorites or not, provided they were believed to have fallen from the skies.

To ascertain the probable views of the folks of the early ages in Europe, we must now see how the untutored races of the present day regard the aerolite.

Professor Garner, the well-known student of the speech of monkeys, who says the negroes of the Guinea Coast do not believe in a beneficent god, but rather in a being who does harm, tells the writer that in one African village he found the chief public treasure was two stones, about the size of hen's eggs. The natives said they had been shot out from the sun and had killed this malevolent being . . . who had, however, revived. They thought the stones had been alive, and because they still made fire when struck together they thought they were not dead yet, but were in a sort of trance. So they built a house for them and guarded them with care.

The Rev. H. S. Taylor gives an instructive account of the fall of a meteor, in the Report of the Government Central Museum of Madras, 1890. Two aerolites travelling through space together, or two pieces torn asunder by explosion, had fallen at Parmallee, Madras, India, February 28th, 1857—reaching the earth two miles apart. Persons were standing near each place of fall. "Many," says Mr. Taylor, "worshipped them." And again, "Of the excitement among the natives I need not speak . . . Some of them supposed they were gods that had fallen."

The American Indians have from time immemorial regarded aerolites as sacred objects. Many specimens of meteoric iron have been found near the "altars" in the mounds of Ohio. One is an amulet in the shape of a large ring, and another, figured and described by Mr. G. F. Kunz, in the American Journal of Science, has still in it the point of a copper chisel, which broke off as the aborigine was trying to split the mass. In the Dacotah winter counts (*vide* Report of the United States Bureau of Ethnology, 1882-83) there are symbols for the fall of an aerolite in 1821 22, and the explanation given of the two separate "counts" is "Large ball of fire with hissing noise," and "a large roaring star fell." The meteorite in Victoria College Museum, of which Prof. A. F. Coleman has given an analysis in the Transactions of this society, is alluded to by the Rev. Geo. McLean, now of Port Arthur, in his "Indians in Canada." For long ages, he tells us, the natives say it lay there, and they attributed to it mysterious powers, he thinks on account of its weight (specific gravity 7.784). Though many had tried to lift it, all had failed, and when they heard the white men had taken it away they put their hands to their mouths and said, "The white man is very strong." They much regretted its removal, and their medicine men prophesied that evil would come upon the tribes and the buffalo forsake the country. The Rev. J. Macdougall, of Morleyville, whose father had it removed, tells the writer that the place where it fell was named on its account Pe-wah-bisk Kah-ah-pit or "the iron, where it lay." Though it had been there from time immemorial, the Indians knew it had fallen from heaven. On passing the place, or anywhere near it, they would go to the spot and leave upon it a piece of tobacco, a broken arrow-head, or some such offering, for they wished the spirit which had sent it to protect them, or at least not to interfere with them in their forays. They also thought it had grown, because their forefathers could lift it, while they could not.

There was an aerolite at Wichita, Kansas, which in a similar way the tribes there revered. We can after this reflect without surprise on the great aerolite placed on the Aztec pyramid of Cholula or those set on other Mexican teocallis.

Mr. Keary, in his "Outlines of Primitive Belief," speaks of the conical shaped stones and the stumps which were conspicuous in the religions of the Syrians and Phœnicians as fetishes, and as perhaps connected with Phallic worship, and thus almost contemptuously dismisses the subject. "Phallic worship" is a good term to conjure by. It serves the mythologist as the glacial theory has served the geologist, to explain everything otherwise inexplicable, or as the term "subjective mind" now serves the psychologist to unravel the knotty questions of mind-reading and second-sight. Surely the above examples of the creeds of various simple peoples are enough to show the real state of the belief of prehistoric men in Europe and Asia, as regards these heaven-sent stones.

We can now proceed to speak of the development of this cult, which has left so many traces on historical pages that it appears to have had a considerable vogue, especially where the Arabian influence prevailed. That intellectual and warlike race had a wide empire in the time of the shepherd kings of Egypt. Under the Tobbaas of the Christian era their sway extended to China, while under the successors of Mahomet they ruled from India to France. They were, from the earliest times, much given to astronomical studies, the appearance of certain stars being the signal for certain kinds of work. Each tribe had a tutelary star, and the worship of the meteorite appears to have been common among them. There were several temples in Arabia where such sacred stones were revered. One, at Petra, was dedicated to a god who had the attributes of Mars, an appropriate dedication, for celestial phenomena have always had much influence on armies. The worship seems, however, to have become in time encrusted with idolatry; images were placed in the temples, and a new litholatry had replaced the old form when Mahomet appeared upon the scene, destroyed the figures and the temples too, excepting one, at Mecca. This is of especial interest here, because the traveller Burton, in his "Mecca and Medina," says that, after an examination of full ten minutes, he is convinced the celebrated black stone there revered, and kissed by every pilgrim, is a meteorite.

This shrine was probably the one referred to by Diodorus (200 B. C.) when he says the Bizomenians possess the most sacred fane in all Arabia, and the strength of inherited religious beliefs and customs is nowhere better shown than in its history. It was several times rebuilt, had gates and palisadings given it that were forged from captured weapons, was adorned with images and dowered with gold. It even endured through Mahomet's iconoclastic times. He did, indeed, remove the great idol that stood above the Karba, or shrine proper, and the various other images and objects the Arabians had venerated there; but his order that the faithful should turn in prayer towards Jerusalem was so obnoxious that it had to be rescinded, and the black stone became and remains the central point of the Mohammedan world. The Kaaba is said to have been built by Abraham, at the divine command, and to be modelled on the oratory of Adam. Isaac furnished the material, and the black stone served as a scaffold, being miraculously raised or lowered to suit Abraham's convenience in building. This stone is fabled to have been as white as milk, but to have become black with the sins of unbelievers. Burton says it is of a reddish-brown colour, with shining points—just what a crypto-siderite after frequent rubbing might well be.

It seems difficult to believe that the kings of the Amorites, upon whom we are told in Joshua, x. 11, that "the Lord cast down great stones from heaven upon them unto Azekah, and they died," were not the victims of a shower of aerolites, especially when it is added in Judges,

v. 20, that "the stars in their courses fought against Sisera." Prof. McCurdy, of Toronto, is of opinion that stones from heaven mean hail, and says the word "hailstones" in the latter part of the verse is simply a plainer term for "stones from heaven," and the ordinary word for hail as well as for stones is employed, viz., *bārād*.

The cult of aerolites at Rome was of Eastern origin, and we will accompany two of them on their westward travels to that city.

In the year 204 B. C. aerolites fell oftener than usual. The decemvirs therefore consulted the Sybilline books, and found "that a foreign enemy landed on Italian soil could be driven off by bringing the Idaeian mother from Pessinus to Rome." At this time Hannibal's terrible grip was loosening, and the consuls were preparing to carry the war into Africa. Great events were in the air. The crisis of an intense struggle was reached. The men at the helm of state felt the turning of the tide; but wishing to leave nothing undone that would command success, desired to fan religious fervour while levies were being raised. Revivalism (*repens religio*) and drill were, as in the time of Cromwell, conjoined. The senate had recently made good friends of the Oracle of Delphi, and had been assured that a crowning victory was in store for them, so the embassy they sent to Attalus of Phrygia, their only Asiatic ally, in charge of a squadron of five line-of-battle ships, visited Delphi *en route*. The priests told the ambassadors that Attalus would grant their requests, and that on obtaining the goddess mother they were to select the best of their citizens to receive her and welcome her to Rome. Attalus accordingly met the envoys with all kindness at Pergamus, his capital, took them to Pessinus, and gave them a sacred stone which the residents said was the mother of the gods. Sending one of their number forward to announce success, they followed at leisure. Meantime, more prodigies at home. Two suns were seen. (Parhelia, so common here, are rare in Italy.) It grew light at night-time. (Query—An aurora?) A bolide like a torch flew from east to west across the sky. Lightning struck several important places, and a great crash, without apparent cause, was heard in one of Juno's temples. When, finally, another shower of stones occurred, they had a day of general supplication and nine days of religious exercises and consultations how to receive the ancestral goddess. She was coming—the vessels were at Terracina—then at Ostia, the mouth of Tiber. They chose Publius Cornelius Scipio. (Livy will neither tell nor guess at the exact reason why he was thought the worthiest of the Romans.) With him all the matrons of the city streamed out to Ostia. He put out from shore to receive the goddess in the roadstead, and, on returning, he delivered her to the matrons, who received her with enthusiasm, and, passing her along the ladies'-chain from hand to hand, in that strange way they carried her to Rome. There were censors at the gates from which clouds of the smoke of spices

perfumed the air. All the people implored the goddess to enter the city as a friend, and to look on the Roman state with a favouring eye. Thus they placed the Idean mother in the temple of Victory and enriched her with abundant gifts. We have no data concerning the shape, size, weight or general appearance of this stone, but we can infer from the above that it was a comparatively small fragment, of perhaps thirty pounds in weight. It is reported, though not by Livy, that an image had been made in a female form and dress, and the stone placed on it for a head or face. This was probably a true aerolite.

There is no room to doubt the meteoric origin of the great black stone of Emesa, Syria, for it is described with scientific precision by Herodian. This was worshipped with divine honour by the natives of the locality, while neighbouring kings and satraps sent annual presents of gold and silver and precious stones to adorn the great temple in which it was housed. At the beginning of the third century, A. D., this god-mountain, El Gabal, was being served by a handsome lad of some fourteen summers, with dances and the music of cymbals, flutes and drums, the young priest being arrayed in richly embroidered garments of cloth of gold, when the Roman legionaries were by intrigues it is not now profitable to recount led to proclaim him emperor. The stone was cone-shaped, probably like an old-fashioned sugar-loaf. It stood on the round end and tapered to a point. It had upon its surface small bumps (*ἑξοχὰς βραχείας*) and indentations (*τύπους*). Its crust was black (*μέλαινα τε ἡ χροιά*). There were marks upon it thought to indicate the figure of the god. (Query—von Widmanstätten lines?) And it was held in reverence because it had fallen from heaven (*διοπέτῃ τε αὐτόν εἶναι σεμνολογοῦσιν*). As the young enthusiast could not well get to Rome at once, he sent a great painting of the stone and himself in the act of adoration, which was put up by his orders above the statue of Victory in the senate chamber. The year after he entered Rome and built a magnificent temple for this strange god, whose image, unlike those of Greek and Roman gods, was not made with hands. He had Syrian maidens dance and musicians circle in procession round it. Hecatombs of victims he sacrificed before it, cattle and sheep. Rivulets of the best and oldest wines mingled with their blood. The chief officers of the army and of the state assisted, in barbaric costume, to elevate above their heads the golden vessels used in the ceremonies, while in a wondering ring stood all that was noblest in the Eternal City. Those who smiled or dared to scoff were mercilessly slain. Every officiating priest of other gods had to preface his litany with the name of Elagabalus. When the stone was brought into the city it was in a chariot adorned profusely with gems and precious metals; the horses, white, were led—no mortal being allowed to drive—and the emperor himself walked backward in front of the aerolite, as being wishful to gaze uninterruptedly at the divine

symbols. In the height of summer, the stone was in like manner carried to a country seat, the roads being strewn with gold-dust on its path. Soon, the emperor who, by the way, married and divorced three wives in as many years, thought the god would be better pleased if he were mated, too, so to his fiancé he brought the Palladium, which had been from the dawn of Roman history concealed from every eye. The fancy did not last long, he thought the Palladium too martial and severe in temper, and he sent to Carthage for the equally prehistoric Ourania (Virgo Celestis), which Dido set up there when she first measured off its liberties with her famous strips of ox-hide. It is not stated how this escaped when Scipio razed the city, and, perhaps, it was an image, not a stone. With his rouged cheeks and blackened eyes or eye-lashes, with his strange vesture and barbaric orgies, the soldiers soon tired of him, and when the inside ring had matters well prepared, an end was put to this farce and to the life of the acolyte emperor (the priest, perhaps, of a debased Zoroastrian or Mithraite creed) at or about the time of his eighteenth birthday. Exit from history the stone he worshipped, with its pittings, crust, markings and other unmistakable characteristics of aerolites.

To complete this paper without a reference to the significance of the noise which accompanies the meteors would be improper. Like thunder, it was the voice of the gods. In the well known passage in Livy which recounts how stones fell on the Alban mount, in the reign of Tullus Hostilius, in a swirl like a gust of hail (*conglobati*), there is an interpretation of the voices of the explosion—"Neglect not the worship of your local deities." Something should be said, too, of the talismanic properties attributed to weapons made from meteorites, such as the scimitar of Attila, which may have been made from meteoric iron, and the poniard of Jehangir, which certainly was.

The latest notable instance of a connection between aerolites and religion is in 1492, when, at Ensisheim, Maximilian fought a battle after a shower of meteors, and won it. The largest of the aerolites was long preserved in the church there, and Maximilian, subsequently negotiating with the Turks, referred to this event as a seal of the divine favour.